Implementing the SNAP E&T Pilots: Challenges Encountered and Lessons Learned



In 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded pilot grants to 10 States—California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington—to test innovative strategies for providing employment and training services through Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T). Most grantees spent roughly the first year of the pilot in a planning phase, which included establishing new partnerships, creating service models, developing new activities, and hiring pilot staff. Grantees began enrolling individuals between January and April 2016, depending on the pilot. This brief presents five implementation challenges and the resulting lessons learned from a cross-pilot analysis of the planning and early implementation periods (from March 2015 through July 2017).



Implementation challenges and lessons learned

Many pilots encountered similar challenges and several were able to implement changes to their policies or procedures to address them. The challenges and how grantees responded to them can serve as lessons for States as they strengthen and expand services under their existing SNAP E&T programs.

1. Strategic partnering was important for the pilots, but developing and cultivating strong partnerships was a major challenge for some grantees.

For most pilots, strong partners were crucial in helping grantees administer the pilots and provide services. SNAP agencies typically do not have the capacity or experience to provide employment and training services, so partnering with other organizations or agencies in the community is essential for providing SNAP E&T services. The grantees partnered with service providers, such as workforce agencies, community-based organizations, or community colleges. They also worked with partners, such as leadership councils or university boards that did not provide services but helped administer or oversee aspects of the pilots.

Before implementing the pilots, the level of partnering to provide SNAP E&T services in the pilot areas varied by State. Initially, some grantees did not have any partnerships in place in part or in all of the areas where the pilots operated. Those that did have existing partnerships often needed to add new partners to help manage or operate the pilot. Some grantees also needed to add providers to help serve the large number of individuals enrolled for the pilot or to offer more robust services than those offered under the existing SNAP E&T program. For most pilots, partners and providers were responsible for contact with individuals—they reached out to the target population, assessed people and placed them in services, offered services and activities, or helped administer or oversee specific parts of the pilots. Grantees sometimes worked with providers to alter existing programs or services to meet the needs of the SNAP population or to join together a group of providers to offer a coordinated package of services that was not previously available through one provider. Only a few grantees developed completely new employment and training-related activities that were not previously offered in the community as part of other programs.

Challenges: Operating the pilots in partnership with other organizations sometimes caused delays and affected service delivery.

- Many of the grantees sought to develop partnerships with organizations that
 had not typically worked with one another or with the SNAP agency. Differences
 in organizational missions and cultures sometimes made it difficult to build
 relationships, particularly when communication among all of the parties was not
 clear and consistent.
- Most grantees found that teaming with organizations that had not previously
 worked together required extensive coordination to align each organization's
 mission to the pilot. For instance, workforce agencies were not always prepared
 to work with individuals for whom service participation was required or who had
 extensive barriers. Staff needed additional training and reinforcement to change
 the way they worked with these populations.
- It often took time to coordinate and standardize policies and processes.
 The different administrative structures across agencies sometimes hindered coordination and slowed the implementation of services. For example, the methods by which organizations tracked data or invoiced for work had to be aligned with the State agency's processes, and each negotiation took time.

Lessons Learned: Most grantees, partners, and providers agreed that partnering for the pilot had positive, long-term effects that they had not anticipated.

- Kansas, Kentucky, and Vermont found that the pilot allowed agencies and
 providers that worked with similar populations to work together in the communities,
 often for the first time, and to share their resources and experiences.
- To address the differences between organizations, some grantees, such as
 Kansas and Kentucky, held collective impact meetings in which all stakeholders
 periodically came together to discuss how to implement and improve the pilot.
 Some staff noted that the coordination between organizations and agencies had
 fundamentally changed the way they communicated and served individuals.

Most grantees, partners, and providers agreed that partnering for the pilot had positive, long-term effects that they had not anticipated.

Most grantees suggested that although they may not be able to continue to offer
the innovative strategies and services after the pilot ended, they would maintain
and expand the partnerships they developed long after the pilot ended.

2. Developing and launching programs or services that did not previously exist was particularly challenging, even when partnering with established providers.

For the pilots, many of the grantees expanded existing SNAP E&T services or added services that providers were already offering to others in the community. However, a few pilots created entirely new services or provided services in areas where SNAP E&T programs were not previously available. Developing these new services was sometimes challenging and resulted in slower than expected implementation.

Challenges: Several grantees offered new services to SNAP participants through the pilot; however, many struggled to launch these new efforts.

- Some pilots faced challenges because the process to establish the new services was unfamiliar to the pilot staff. The process could be complicated and staff sometimes found they needed more experience or resources than were available. For example, pilots in California and Mississippi developed new subsidized employment opportunities, but both pilots encountered issues with moving individuals into these services. They faced challenges finding employers who were both a good fit for individuals in the pilot and were willing to hire them. Even when the pilot did identify employers, the processes for placing individuals in jobs could be slow because they did not meet the requirements for placement or because being matched to an available job could take a long time.
- Some grantees struggled to create services that ultimately worked well for the population they were serving. The grantee in Washington developed a required upfront soft-skills training course that did not previously exist in the community. They borrowed content from other programs but designed the structure, number and order of the modules, and requirements based on their understanding of the population. Although Washington was able to roll out the course at the start of the pilot, providers found that it often did not meet the needs of individuals with barriers, which was the target population for the pilot. Few people were able to complete all six modules in order and they could not participate in other activities before they completed the entire six-week course, so few individuals progressed to other activities.
- A few grantees had to create a network of services in the pilot areas that did not previously offer SNAP E&T services, which was a much bigger challenge. For example, Kentucky did not have an existing SNAP E&T program in any of the pilot counties before the pilot began, so they heavily leveraged employment and training providers already offering services in these areas. However, they found that coordinating with these organizations was complicated because many of the agencies and organizations had not worked with each other previously. The goals and missions of the various partner and provider organizations sometimes did not align, which made it difficult to weave existing services into a package that best fit the needs of those targeted for the pilot.

Some pilots faced challenges because the process to establish the new services was unfamiliar to the pilot staff. The process could be complicated and staff sometimes found they needed more experience or resources than were available.

Lessons Learned: Launching new services required flexibility, a willingness to make changes to the initial designs to respond to the challenges that emerged, and the ability of staff to develop new skills to respond to individuals' needs. The pilots that were able to identify issues quickly and were willing to pivot to alter their approaches were able to better mitigate the challenges they faced, for example:

- The grantee in California loosened the qualification requirements for subsidized employment, and this improved the flow of individuals into the activity.
- The grantee in Washington made several changes to their soft-skills course, including adjusting the order in which individuals could start the course. They could start in any week not just in the first week as initially designed. The grantee also allowed those who were progressing in the course to start other activities, such as work-based learning opportunities while in soft-skills training. They also offered expedited courses that allowed individuals to complete the six-week course more quickly.
- In Mississippi, not all community colleges had experience with recruiting
 employers, but over time staff learned techniques for recruiting and were able to
 build a portfolio of employers where they could place individuals. One college took
 a different approach and relied on the individuals in the pilot to find an employer
 where they wanted to work, and then the college created a contract with that
 employer, which helped to target the positions to individuals' interests.

The grantees that had to develop more extensive services suggested that more planning time to coordinate efforts and better communication across organizations were important for success. The grantee in Kentucky indicated that, in retrospect, they would have taken a larger role in developing pilot services across organizations and ensuring that each understood their roles. They also needed to clearly explain and provide documentation for how the pilot policies differed from each organizations' existing policies, which staff sometimes found confusing. In addition, getting buy-in from staff at all levels during the planning period would have helped. The leadership at all of the organizations were excited about the pilot and involved in planning, but few of the frontline staff were involved. After the pilot began, holding the collective impact meetings with staff across levels gave them a voice in the process and allowed for knowledge sharing to improve the policies and procedures across organizations.

3. Take-up rates for education, occupational skills training, and work-based learning activities were often lower than anticipated.

Before the pilots began, most grantees estimated that a relatively high number of individuals would participate in education, occupation skills training, and work-based learning activities. However, take-up of these activities was lower than anticipated. Several factors contributed to this including individuals wanting employment immediately instead of participating in activities, a lack of interest in the offered services, and individual barriers to participating in these activities, such as transportation or health issues.

The pilots that were able to identify issues quickly and were willing to pivot to alter their approaches were able to better mitigate the challenges they faced.

Challenges: Both staff and individuals participating in the pilot noted that take-up of education and occupational skills training activities was challenging due to individuals' needs, interests, and limitations.

- Individuals frequently suggested they needed income to pay their living expenses, so finding a job was a priority. Although some may have been interested in other activities, they felt they could not afford to be out of the workforce while completing an education or occupational skills training program. For example, in Kansas and Illinois pilots, fewer individuals than expected participated in occupational skills training, but many more than anticipated participated in job readiness skills training because individuals were interested in moving into the workforce quickly.
- In a few pilots that offered a limited number of occupational skills training options, including Delaware and Virginia, some individuals were not interested in training because the options did not align with their career aspirations. Initially, Georgia had a similar problem because it offered training for only a few in-demand occupations that were not of interest to many individuals in the pilot; eventually, the pilot expanded its offerings to better align with individuals' needs and interests.
- Individuals commonly faced barriers that could have limited their ability to participate in some activities. The most frequently cited barrier was lack of transportation. Other barriers included housing instability, physical or mental health issues, substance use disorders, and lack of child care. Although the pilots offered support services to help mitigate some of these barriers, the level or duration of the supports often did not alleviate the issues, which might have led to inconsistent engagement in activities. For example, in Washington, individuals needed to reduce their barriers to employment before moving to activities; this sometimes took several months of dealing with extensive issues like housing instability or substance use disorders. In other pilots, only those who met certain criteria (such as educational level) could enter occupational skills training or workbased learning, so this further limited access for those with severe barriers.

Lessons Learned: Despite the range of robust training and employment options available in many of the pilots, some individuals were not interested in, were not prepared for, or could not make time for the commitment needed to participate in activities.

- Some pilots were able to respond to these challenges by shifting resources from occupational skills training to job readiness or by offering more training options.
- Other pilots realized there was a need for more support services to address barriers, and worked with individuals upfront to reduce their barriers before referring them to activities.
- Most grantees found that programs worked best when services were individualized
 to the needs of SNAP participants, with multiple pathways and an array of support
 services available to meet people's needs.

Take-up of education and occupational skills training activities was challenging due to individuals' needs, interests, and limitations.

4. Rigid service models sometimes inadvertently affected rates of take-up and completion of services.

After implementing the planned service models, several grantees realized pilot models were not working as planned and were affecting how individuals engaged in services. Reasons for this included having multiple "hand-off" points; upfront requirements before individuals could enter employment, education, and occupational skills training activities; and extended waiting periods before starting education or training activities. As a result, individuals sometimes took up services at lower rates than expected, did not progress through the service model as originally designed, or left the pilot before completing services.

Challenges: Several of the grantees inadvertently created pilot service models that made it difficult for individuals to access services and complete their activities. These structural issues included:

- Drop-off between referrals. After SNAP agencies in Georgia, Illinois, and
 Virginia enrolled individuals into the pilot during orientations at their offices,
 those individuals eligible to receive pilot services were scheduled for subsequent
 orientations at service providers. Significant drop-off occurred between these
 orientations and between the provider orientation and the start of education,
 training, and employment activities.
- Up-front requirements affecting take-up of other activities. The Mississippi and Washington pilots required individuals to participate in multi-week, soft-skills training programs before moving to other activities. Individuals had to complete a four and six week training, respectively, before starting education, occupational skills training, or work-based learning activities. Both pilots found that some individuals were not interested in the soft-skills training. Staff reported that some individuals indicated they needed to work and could not afford to attend a full-day class for several weeks. This caused some to leave the pilot before completing services or to find a job on their own and stop coming to the classes. In Washington, the completion rate for the soft-skills classes was much lower than expected, and thus few individuals were eligible to move on to education, occupational skills training, and work-based learning opportunities.
- Low take-up of activities that required a wait before starting. Several pilots also faced challenges coordinating the flow of individuals into the pilot with the start dates of activities, particularly for occupational skills training classes. Most training classes were offered on semester or quarterly schedules at community colleges. Other providers offered classes with set start dates or did not start a new class until enough individuals enrolled. Most pilots did not offer occupational skills training on a rolling basis, but the pilots enrolled individuals continuously over a one- to two-year period. This led to individuals having to wait until the start of the next scheduled class, which could be a few weeks to months later—especially for individuals referred to training just after classes began. Most pilots found that this lag caused some individuals to exit because they were not interested in other available activities or because they could not afford to go without a paycheck during the waiting period. In other cases, some individuals waiting for a class to begin would ultimately not participate in the class because they found employment or chose to participate in other activities.

Several of the grantees inadvertently created pilot service models that made it difficult for individuals to access services and complete their activities Lessons Learned: To addresses these challenges, a few pilots were able to make adjustments to the service model. Washington began allowing some individuals in the soft-skills program to also start work-based learning to earn money and get work experience while finishing the soft-skills training. In Delaware, the community provider offering culinary training helped reduce wait times between courses by starting classes with fewer people than was normally required and enrolling non-pilot individuals into the classes when there were not enough individuals referred from the pilot so classes would not be cancelled. Although individual providers may have some flexibility to make accommodations, coordinating with larger, complex organizations, such as community colleges, with well-established course schedules can be difficult.

Designing programs that from the beginning have fewer hand-offs or providing "warm referrals" (when case managers reach out to another organization on behalf of the individual and schedule appointments or escort individuals to the organization) help eliminate some of these challenges. Also, for programs primarily relying on community colleges, coordinating recruitment efforts with the start of classes can decrease the wait times for training.

5. Staff in most pilots struggled to recruit individuals, as many organizations did not traditionally recruit for their programs.

Most grantees and their providers were not accustomed to recruiting individuals to participate in existing SNAP E&T programs. Generally, these providers serve whomever voluntarily comes through their doors, and staff do not have to seek out participants to fill their programs. However, for the pilots, grantees needed to enroll many more individuals than they typically served, which required extensive outreach and active recruitment. Although staff in most pilots found the recruitment process to be challenging, some identified strategies that were effective in meeting their enrollment targets.

Challenges: Because of the robust services offered through the pilots, many grantees initially thought they would not need to do much recruitment, and some did not develop detailed outreach plans or approaches before the pilot began. However, once they began enrolling individuals into the pilot, most grantees had to add resources or change their approach to meet their enrollment goals.

- Washington did not initially share lists of eligible SNAP participants with providers, but later provided lists when service providers struggled to connect with the pilot target population.
- The Kentucky, Mississippi, and Georgia pilots struggled to enroll enough people, so after about a year, they all developed and distributed videos that introduced the pilots and provided success stories.
- A few pilots employed dedicated recruiters to conduct outreach and enrollment. (Case managers were conducting the recruitment and enrollment initially in several pilots).

Some grantees did not coordinate the recruitment or provide a systematic approach for outreach, instead allowing each provider to develop an approach and materials that best fit its population. Although providers are often more knowledgeable about the communities they serve, the level of outreach and messaging was sometimes disjointed across the pilot area.

Designing programs that have fewer hand-offs or providing "warm referrals" help to reduce drop-off between referrals.

Lessons Learned: Although most States do not focus on recruiting for their SNAP E&T programs, some States and providers recognize the importance of outreach for accessing those most in need of employment and training-related services. Grantees learned several lessons that could help States interested in expanding recruitment.

- Most grantees acknowledged that having a recruitment plan in place from the start of the pilot would have benefited them.
- Grantees and their partners tried several approaches for recruiting, recognizing that a one-size fits all approach would not work.
- Most created a list of SNAP participants who were potentially eligible for the pilot and
 circulated it to partners and providers, who would make calls and send letters or emails
 to those on the list. However, in most States, staff found that the contact information
 from the SNAP administrative files was out of date for many individuals by the time they
 began recruiting. Phone numbers were disconnected or no one answered, and letters
 were returned because the individual no longer lived at the address.
- Approaches that produced more successful results included conducting home
 visits or meeting people in the community (as pilot staff in California and Delaware
 did); placing pilot outreach staff at local SNAP offices (as was done in Delaware,
 Mississippi, and Illinois); and implementing marketing campaigns through ads on
 radio, buses, billboards, videos, and flyers.

To address inconsistent messaging or level of outreach among multiple providers, a few grantees provided plans or materials and messaging for all partners and providers to use. These more centralized approaches helped ensure providers were reaching SNAP participants across the State and relaying a uniform message.

- Kansas hired a professional marketing firm during the planning phase to develop
 a detailed outreach plan. The firm spent months conducting focus groups and
 interviews with staff, SNAP participants, and partners and providers to test
 messaging and prototype materials. It distributed the materials and plan to all
 providers and reinforced the messaging and approach during frequent meetings.
- Other pilots, such as Kentucky, developed outreach materials with consistent messaging that providers could tailor slightly to meet their needs.

Conclusion

Although the SNAP E&T pilots have ended, the lessons learned during the planning and early implementation periods are beneficial for the current SNAP E&T program administrators and providers. As States expand existing programs to include more 50/50 partnerships and provide occupational skills training and subsidized employment, they will encounter many of the same issues that emerged in the pilots. The pilots showed that coordinated outreach and recruitment is important for connecting SNAP E&T participants with services even when intensive services and robust activities are offered. It is also critical that States are able to connect individuals with support services (referred to as participant reimbursements in the SNAP E&T program) to reduce their barriers to participation. In addition, anticipating the amount

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of time needed for coordination and planning when onboarding new partners, understanding the complexity of developing and implementing new activities in the program, and identifying obstacles to take-up rates prior to implementation also can help administrators avoid pitfalls. As challenges are encountered, administrators and providers need to be flexible and make adjustments to minimize the issues.

For more information: Detailed interim findings in the full report, "Evaluation of SNAP Employment and Training Pilots: Summary Report" are available at https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis. Reports summarizing early findings from the 10 individual pilot reports also are available.

About the study

In the Agricultural Act of 2014, Congress authorized and funded 10 SNAP E&T pilots to test a range of innovative strategies to help SNAP participants find employment that increases their incomes and reduces their need for public assistance benefits. To encourage a diversity of approaches, each grantee identified target populations, selected partners and service providers, and determined which services and activities best met their populations' needs. The legislation that authorized the pilots also included funding for a randomized controlled trial evaluation to assess the impacts of the pilots, which was awarded to Mathematica.

The implementation-related lessons identified in this brief are based on analysis of qualitative data collected through telephone calls and in-person interviews with pilot staff from State agencies, partners, and providers, and focus groups conducted with individuals participating in the pilot.



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